

Macarthur Legal Centre 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary – 3 November 2017

Justice AJ Payne

Thank you so much for the invitation to speak at this important event celebrating 30 years of the Macarthur Legal Centre. Contrary to the published information you have all received in advertising this event, I am not Professor Simon Rice. I am, however, one of the founders of what we called the Campbelltown Legal Centre. My name is Tony Payne. I am a Court of Appeal judge. I had prepared some wry observations about my journey in life from Macarthur Legal Centre to the Court of Appeal but when I tried them out on my Associate earlier today she said, "*Do you really want to be that person?*".

I will, however, say a few things about the founding of the Centre. As the founding of the Macarthur Legal Centre was – as my son calls it – in the olden days – my recollections are imperfect and lack a degree of reliability.

In late 1985 I was a law student volunteer working at Redfern Legal Centre. I was working closely with Jim Simpson, then a partner at a city law firm and now president of the Council for Intellectual Disability and a long term member of the Guardianship Division of NCAT and Julia Hall, another Redfern Legal Centre volunteer, to try and get funding for a new Intellectual Disability Rights Service. Many here may know Julia most recently as the long term CEO of the National Association of Community Legal Centres.

Putting together the various funding proposals for the proposed IDRS and working closely in conducting community legal education throughout Sydney with Julia led us to think that there was a demonstrable unmet need in the west for the type of free

initial legal advice and assistance that was available to people in the inner suburbs of Sydney.

At that time Western Sydney was poorly serviced by community legal centres. The closest legal centre to the Macarthur area was the reasonably new Macquarie Legal Centre at Parramatta. The then Bar Association representative on the Legal Aid Commission, a QC not known for his progressive views, made a point which we thought was a good one, that virtually all of the free legal assistance then offered by community legal centres was being offered in what he called “trendy inner suburbs”.

Julia reminds me that the birth of the Macarthur Legal Centre was almost entirely food based. Our initial discussions were held in a Thai restaurant in Redfern Street. It was Julia’s idea that if we wanted to start a new legal centre, we needed help. So she approached Simon Rice – a dashing young lawyer who I knew then only by his very thin ties. More food was consumed – this time a lunch in a pub so that Simon and I could meet. Upon Simon leaving, Julia reports that I said, “Are you sure about this friend of yours?”. She assured me, “I promise it will be alright”. And here we all are happily today, 30 years later.

The three of us spent a good deal of time mapping out how we would go about establishing a new community legal centre. The first thing we needed was data to back up the impression we had of unmet legal need in the Macarthur area. We began organising community legal education sessions with speakers on a variety of topics and trying to meet important local figures in the Macarthur area. Fairly quickly we came up with Campbelltown as the best place for a new legal centre, after looking carefully at Liverpool and Castle Hill.

An important step in establishing the Centre was to get a \$5,000 grant from the Law Foundation of NSW to study the feasibility of establishing a community legal centre at Campbelltown. We spent that money on employing a part time research officer and taking premises at the Minto Shopping Centre for six months. Minto Shopping Centre was then tiny. We conducted numerous community legal education events in the area.

Some were a great success. Some were an unmitigated disaster. I remember a wildly unsuccessful event on a Saturday morning at Eagle Vale where we were going to speak about consumer credit. No one turned up. Lesson learned: as a sort of reverse of the line from the old Kevin Costner movie – if you build it, they will come. If you stage events at unpopular times, people will not come.

There was a deal of resistance to establishing a community legal centre at Campbelltown. Some important local solicitors were initially against establishing a legal centre in the Macarthur region. In this regard, Julia's plan to deploy Simon as our secret weapon paid off with lunches he held with prominent local solicitors and drinks with the Law Society that smoothed the way.

Along the way, via this outreach, we met local social workers and solicitors who would be essential in starting the new legal centre. They formed the backbone of the new management committee we established for the Association we formed under the Associations Incorporation Act to conduct the Centre.

We canvassed support from local community organisations – which is where we met lots of good people who eventually became part of the management committee. The Local Council was, from the beginning, supportive of the proposed centre.

In 1986, we put in an application to the NSW Legal Aid Commission for funding of a new community legal centre based in Campbelltown. We drew heavily on the evidence gathered as part of the six month project we had conducted with the \$5,000 Law Foundation grant. The process was the height of what we thought was modernity and sophistication - the three of us upstairs in Redfern Town Hall, typing applications and reports on little Apple Macs and using dot matrix printers.

The application was successful – I think we received a grant of \$30,000 p.a. plus CPI for a period of three years. Enough for 1.5 employees.

A critical thing was the support of the Local Council which I mentioned earlier. The Council leased us premises close to the train station at Campbelltown for virtually nothing other than payment of utilities.

The facilities were basic. The house was a fibro shack, now demolished. But the position next to the station was great. We spent weekends painting the rooms – painting them pink - and cleaning out the old house. We had a sign made. We moved to Broughton Street in March 1987.

I originally thought that we employed our first solicitor and opened for our first advice sessions at the end of 2016 – which makes this the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary – but I'm persuaded I was clearly wrong. That is not such an easy thing for a Court of Appeal judge to say.

On the first night of our advice sessions, someone – name unknown – put a sign up outside a vacant building nearby, advertising free legal advice up the road from the Centre. I think we took it down.

I have read the latest annual report of the Macarthur Legal Centre. Everybody involved can be very proud. The volume and diversity of the work done is remarkable.

When we conceived the Centre we initially focussed on family violence, youth issues, consumer credit and tenancy problems. In all of these areas the Centre has taken our initial vision and much improved it. I am pleased to see the Centre has remedied what in hindsight was a glaring omission in our vision and engaged closely with the local Aboriginal community.

The Macarthur Legal Centre has achieved much in its 30 year history. I can only hope that the next 30 years are as productive. I'm proud to have been associated with the Centre at its outset 30 years ago.

Thank you.